

Original Communication

Are Virtues Shaped by National Cultures or Religions?

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Abstract. The present paper examines the relative influence of religion and nation on conceptions of virtues. In a first study, conducted in the Netherlands, 926 respondents of different profession, age, sex, and religious background rank ordered a list of 15 virtues. A comparison of Dutch Muslims and non-Muslims showed a remarkably high resemblance in their ratings of virtues. Only faith was rated as being much more important by Muslims than by non-Muslims. In the second study, the influence of national cultures was examined. Adults ($N = 795$) from two culturally relatively similar countries, Germany and the Netherlands, and from Spain rated the same list of virtues. Crossnational differences between the two Northern European countries and Spain by far exceeded the influence of religion on the importance ratings of virtues. The implications of the findings for the often-mentioned clash of religions are discussed. Currently, the influence of religion on the values of immigrants may be overemphasized and other important characteristics may be underestimated.

Keywords: national cultures, national virtues, virtues and religion, Muslims versus non-Muslims, morality

Introduction

Do national cultures influence moral ideas or do different religious groups that take part in the society shape moral ideas? This study examines the relative influence of religion versus national culture on moral ideas. This theme is investigated through an analysis of virtues, which may become a special and useful approach to register divergence or convergence of moral principles within societies as virtue refers to a moral concept that everybody can easily understand. The Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and their Christian disciples Augustine and Aquinas examined virtues because they regarded them to be the character traits that make someone a “good person.” We define virtues as “morally good personal characteristics” that everyone can either possess or learn. They can be considered to form a subset of traits. They dictate how the individual ought to behave or ought to be. Values such as humor, intelligence, or beauty may be desirable but not necessarily something one ought to bring into practice. Therefore, not all values are virtues. This distinguishes virtues from values, although virtues can also be seen as a subset of values. It is hard to imagine a virtue that cannot be considered a value. Many virtues, for instance, helpfulness and justice, refer to concrete social interactions between individuals, which is why virtues can become guiding principles when people try to enhance social cohesion or integration of immigrant groups.

There has been a long-standing interest among psychologists in concepts related to morality. Clear examples are Piaget’s (1997) and Kohlberg’s (1984) work on the development of moral judgment in children. Additionally, various virtues have become the focus of research attention, often referred to as strengths (Schimmel, 2000). Bandura (1973), for instance, explored the determinants of altruism, empathy, and helping behavior, and Rokeach (1973) published extensively on the nature of values. Perhaps most directly, Erikson (1959, 1982) examined a variety of virtues or basic strengths, such as hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom, and how these relate to stages of development.

Over time, the concept of morality has become more important, if not fashionable, in psychology. In modern evolutionary psychology, altruistic behavior is seen as crucial for group cohesion and consequently for the survival of the species (e.g., De Waal, 2006). For instance, De Waal (2006) argued in his book, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*, that human morality grows from our genes, and that the traits that define morality – empathy, reciprocity, reconciliation, and consolation – can be observed in many animals, most particularly in primates. According to De Waal, empathy is an automatic response seen in dogs, apes, and human infants. It is an immediate response, arising too quickly to be under voluntary control. The concept of virtue has also returned to the domain of personality psychology. In a factor-analytical study of per-

sonality characteristics, De Raad and Barelds (2008) reported a first factor they labeled “virtue.” Baumeister (2005, p. 308), in his book *The Cultural Animal*, explained that the human being is also a moral animal: “Undoubtedly some of culture’s strongest means to influence behavior are contained in morality.” The positive psychology movement also refocused psychology on human strengths and virtues over the last decade. A key publication was Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi’s special issue of *American Psychologist* (2000) on positive psychology. Dahlsgaard, Peterson, and Seligman (2005) examined religious and philosophical traditions around the world and found a group of six core virtues. They argued that a classification of positive traits is essential for research and practice.

There is an additional reason for the renewed interest in moral principles: Globalization and immigration have brought many different cultures into contact. In Western Europe, and to a lesser degree in the United States and Canada, a great number of immigrants originate from Muslim countries. Muslims are still a minority group in the European Union, making up roughly 5% of its total population, but Islam is a fast-growing religion in Europe. Many Muslim immigrants bring a vital religion with them, together with a set of moral values that are often perceived to be incompatible with Western values (see, e.g., Zick, Küpper, & Hövermann, 2011). Events such as 9/11, the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq seem to have reinforced fears about a possible clash between postmodern Christian values and Islamic values in Western immigration countries. Majority groups in Western immigration countries tend to believe that Muslims want to remain distinct from society in their countries, rather than adopting the culture of the majority (The Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2005; Van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998). The Pew survey further showed that, in countries with significant Muslim minorities, including the United States and Canada, Muslims have a growing sense of Islamic identity. In Western Europe, particularly in Germany and The Netherlands, Muslims are perceived negatively (The Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2005). A new study by the Pew Global Attitudes Project (2006, p. 1) again revealed that “after a year marked by riots over cartoon portrayals of Muhammad, a major terrorist attack in London, and continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, most Muslims and Westerners are convinced that relations between them are generally bad these days.”

These developments bring us to the question of whether we must expect fundamental values to diverge in societies that are increasingly becoming religiously heterogeneous. Will different religious values diverge within immigration countries – or will they gradually and eventually converge? There are two possible outcomes according to Inglehart and Baker (2000):

1) New religious groups and their institutions instill their distinctively moral values in their followers, thus enhancing the disparity of moral values within the host society.

2) Religious traditions that have historically shaped a national culture continue to have an impact, through national institutions, on the society as a whole, including newcomers.

Inglehart and Baker found evidence for the impact of national institutions on the convergence of religious values within nations. They mention as examples German and Dutch Catholics who were shaped by the dominant Protestant institutions in the respective countries. In a similar vein, a “European Islam” may develop, shaped by religious institutions in Europe. A somewhat different, but related point of view is expressed by Huntington in his book *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), who stated that the great division among humankind would be cultural. Nation states would continue to be the most powerful actors, but the most important political conflicts would occur between different civilizations or religions. Apparently, he also considered nations – or blocs of nations – the main agents of culture. A survey in Great Britain and the United States in 2008 showed that, in spite of the shared Christian heritage in both nations, there are much stronger discrepancies between British and American respondents on religious issues than on a variety of important political issues (“Anglo-Saxon attitudes,” 2008). On the other hand, research by Cohen and Hill (2007) suggested that religious group differences can be conceptualized as cultural differences that shape personal and social aspects of religious and spiritual motivation, moral judgment, and other processes. They do not, however, exclude the theoretical perspective that country differences produce religion differences.

It would require a lengthy longitudinal study to examine the gradual processes of convergence or divergence of moral values between various religious groups within immigration nations. However, in order to be able to draw some conclusions at present, we performed two studies. In the first study, we focused on the relative importance of virtues across different religious groups in The Netherlands, a country in which different religions have coexisted for a long time. In all major religions, virtues are explicitly mentioned. In Christianity, Aquino (1225–1274) postulated three theological virtues: hope, love, and faith. In the Koran there is a list of over 25 virtues – not all of them can be crucial, although faith and charity, being two of the five pillars of Islam, are definitely core values. In the second study, we compared the importance ratings of virtues in a Dutch sample with those in a German sample. Germany and The Netherlands were chosen because they were mentioned by Inglehart and Baker (2000) as nations that have had a similar experience of coexistence of different religious groups. Another reason to choose Germany is that it is culturally most related to The Netherlands. Germany has comparable scores on three of Hofstede’s (1991) dimensions (individualism/collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance); it only scores considerably higher than The Netherlands on masculinity.

These two samples were compared with a sample from the culturally more distant (more collectivistic) Spain that has been predominantly Roman Catholic for centuries. Spain has a slightly higher power distance and uncertainty avoidance than the other two nations and is much lower on masculinity than Germany. In a previous study Van Oudenhoven, De Raad et al. (2008) compared the frequency of abuse terms in 11 countries (including Spain, Germany, and The Netherlands). Terms of abuse can also be seen as indicators of (violation of) moral values. Differences in terms of abuse were found to reflect differences in moral expressiveness between cultures in accordance with assumed discrepancies in individualism versus collectivism: In Spain, terms referring to lack of politeness or offending relatives were much more frequent than in Germany or The Netherlands. All three nations have growing numbers of immigrants from Muslim countries.

Study 1

Method

Respondents

Respondents were 83 teachers, 221 local politicians, 200 adults largely approached via a snowball method, and 422 secondary school students. The four groups of respondents came from different areas in The Netherlands; their average age was 31.47 years ($SD = 16.74$); half of the respondents were female; 19% of the group consisted of Catholics, 18% of Protestants, 15% of Muslims, 11% belonged to a heterogeneous group with different philosophies of life, and 35% considered themselves nonreligious.

Instrument

Respondents filled out a questionnaire in Dutch. First, they answered a series of demographic questions on their sex, country of birth, age, education, maternal language, and religion. Next, they were asked to mention "important personal characteristics that they would like to put in practice in daily life." Finally, to answer the crucial question of this study, they were to distribute a set 15 virtues among five columns, three in each column according to the importance attributed to them. This way, a 5-point scale was formed from 1 (= *least important*) to 5 (= *most important*). The list of 15 virtues (respect, justice, wisdom, joy, resolution, mercy, reliability, hope, courage, faith, moderation, openness, modesty, love, and helpfulness) was based on a survey among spiritual leaders asked to come up with important virtues (Van Oudenhoven, Blank, Leemhuis, Pomp, & Sluis, 2008). The 64 virtues they mentioned were reduced to a much smaller

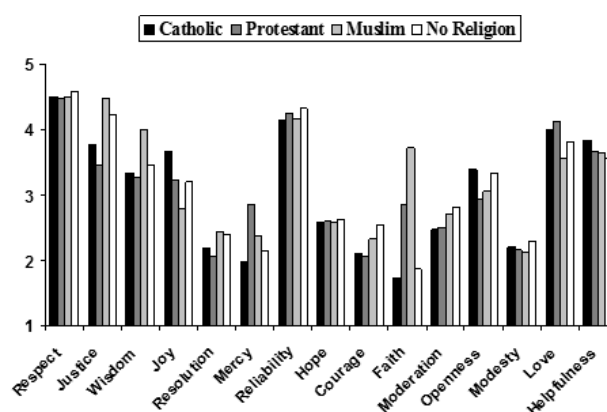


Figure 1. The importance of virtues (1 = *least important*, 5 = *most important*) rated by different (non)religious groups in The Netherlands ($n = 926$).

number by a group of five independent judges who categorized them on the basis of resemblance. They individually made groups of virtues they thought were highly related. These five groups of virtues showed a large amount of overlap. Finally, on the basis of these categories, the researchers formed a set of 15 virtues labeled as mentioned above.

Results and Discussion

There were only minor differences in importance scores between the teachers, politicians, adults, and students. Gender differences in particular were negligible: Males and females appear to mutually replicate their scores. Generally, the results in Figure 1 do not show large differences between Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and nonreligious respondents. The major exception is the virtue faith, which is clearly more important for Muslims than for the other three groups. However, this should probably – at least partly – be attributed to the sampling in that most Muslim respondents were approached at Islamic schools and not at public schools, where teaching of religion is minimal and more general. The rank-order correlation (Spearman's ρ) of importance of virtues between Muslims and non-Muslims is .74 (and .92 if we leave the virtue faith out of the analysis). These correlations suggest that, in general, there is considerable agreement between Dutch Muslims and non-Islamic Dutch about which virtues are important and which are not. Furthermore, the average difference between Muslims and non-Muslims on a scale of 1–5 was only .25 (and only .19 on the list of virtues without faith). Interestingly, Dutch Muslims show the highest correlation ($r = .86$) in importance ratings with Dutch Protestants, and the lowest ($r = .68$) with Dutch Catholics.

Study 2

Method

Respondents

Respondents were from Germany ($n = 218$), Spain ($n = 204$), and The Netherlands ($n = 373$). The average age of German participants was 29.89 years ($SD = 11.04$); 45% of them were male. The average age of the Spaniards was 26.94 years ($SD = 10.49$); 52% of them were male. The average age of the Dutch was 24.83 years ($SD = 6.63$); 28% of them were male. Respondents in the three countries were approached at several faculties by the researchers and in the personal networks of the researchers. Additional respondents were approached via the snowball sampling technique. Most of the participants were nonreligious. All respondents were highly educated (college level or higher); approximately 70% of them were students.

Instrument

Respondents filled out a questionnaire almost identical to that used in Study 1. The questionnaires were in German, Spanish, and Dutch; they had been translated from Dutch and backtranslated by a team of bilingual (Dutch-Spanish and Dutch-German) researchers.

Results and Discussion

Again, there were only negligible gender differences in importance ratings of virtues. An analysis of variance of importance of virtue ratings with nation as a between-subjects factor yielded significant differences on all virtues. A Bonferroni posthoc analysis was conducted to determine which nations differ in importance ratings. The results showed that most of the significant differences found were between the Germans and Spaniards (see Table 1). The largest overall difference (.51) was found between the Germans and Spaniards (see also Figure 2). A slightly smaller overall difference of .41 was found between the Dutch and Spaniards. The rank order cor-

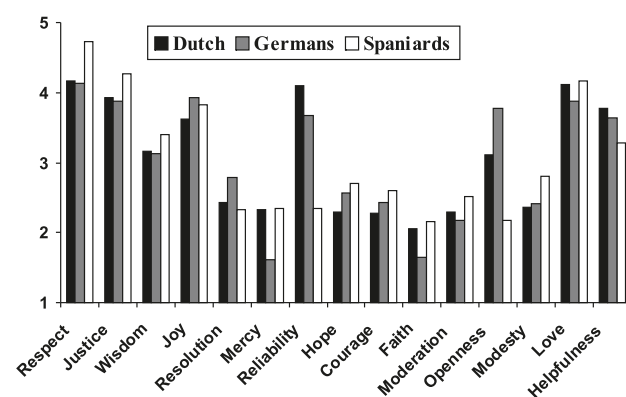


Figure 2. Importance of virtues ratings by Dutch, German, and Spanish participants (1 = least important; 5 = most important).

Table 1

Mean importance scores (1 = least important; 5 = most important), standard deviations for all 15 virtues in three nations, and Bonferroni posthoc analyses

Virtue	Dutch	German	Spanish				Largest difference found between:
				Dutch vs. German	Dutch vs. Spanish	German vs. Spanish	
				<i>p</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	
Respect	4.16 (1.05)	4.14 (1.12)	4.73 (0.81)	1.00	.0001	.0001	Spanish-German
Justice	3.92 (1.07)	3.88 (1.06)	4.27 (1.01)	1.00	.0001	.0001	Spanish-German
Wisdom	3.16 (1.25)	3.13 (1.22)	3.40 (1.07)	1.00	.067	.071	Spanish-German
Joy	3.62 (1.22)	3.92 (1.03)	3.83 (1.10)	.006	.100	1.00	Dutch-German
Resolution	2.43 (1.23)	2.79 (1.22)	2.32 (1.24)	.001	.0001	.0001	Spanish-German
Mercy	2.32 (1.06)	1.61 (0.85)	2.35 (1.20)	.0001	1.00	.0001	Spanish-German
Reliability	4.10 (0.93)	3.67 (1.14)	2.47 (1.16)	.0001	.0001	.0001	Dutch-Spanish
Hope	2.29 (1.13)	2.56 (1.23)	2.70 (1.25)	.026	.0001	.655	Dutch-Spanish
Courage	2.28 (1.13)	2.43 (1.17)	2.60 (1.16)	.449	.007	.398	Dutch-Spanish
Faith	2.05 (1.49)	1.65 (1.06)	2.15 (1.33)	.001	1.00	.001	Spanish-German
Moderation	2.30 (1.15)	2.17 (1.20)	2.51 (1.16)	.530	.134	.009	Spanish-German
Openness	3.11 (1.28)	3.78 (1.06)	2.17 (1.20)	.0001	.0001	.0001	Spanish-German
Modesty	2.36 (1.23)	2.41 (1.16)	2.80 (1.21)	1.00	.0001	.002	Dutch-Spanish
Love	4.12 (1.13)	3.88 (1.17)	4.16 (1.14)	.045	1.00	.035	Spanish-German
Helpfulness	3.77 (1.13)	3.63 (1.13)	3.28 (1.07)	.451	.0001	.004	Dutch-Spanish

relation (Spearman's ρ) of the sets of virtue importance ratings between the Germans and the Dutch was .85. The average mean score difference in importance ratings between the Dutch and Germans was .27; Germans and Dutch indeed show considerable resemblance with respect to virtues. The largest mean difference (.71) between the two nations concerned mercy. The Germans scored lower than the Dutch on mercy, which may be expected on the basis of Germany's high masculinity scores (Hofstede, 1991). The average differences in virtue ratings between Germany and The Netherlands, on the one hand, and Germany and Spain, on the other hand (.51 and .41, respectively) appear to be much larger than the .25 between Muslims and non-Muslims in Study 1 (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). We did not find significant differences in wisdom, one of the cardinal virtues, and only found very small differences with respect to love, one of the theological virtues. Wisdom and love are both classical virtues. The strongest differences in importance ratings of virtues were found with respect to reliability and openness. They seem to be culture-dependent.

General Discussion

Do national cultures or religions shape moral ideas? The title of this paper presents the reader with that choice. In view of the growing importance of religion in the public discourse on values, we suspect that most people would probably bet on religion. However, according to our data, the correct answer is national culture.

Differences in the importance ratings of virtues between Spaniards, on the one hand, and Germans or Dutch, on the other hand, are much larger than between Muslims and non-Muslims in The Netherlands. Moreover, our results show that Muslims in The Netherlands resemble Dutch non-Muslims at least as much as the Dutch resemble the Germans. This finding becomes even more convincing if we do not take the virtue of faith into account. Faith is an ambivalent term. According to the Oxford dictionary, it can mean both "reliance or trust in," which can be seen as a virtue; or as a "religious doctrine," which can also be seen as a duty. In view of the strong sanctions against apostasy from Islam, in particular the banishment from the religious community, it is not surprising that Muslims found it difficult to not attach importance to their faith, that is, their religious doctrine.

The conclusion that conceptions of virtues differ more between nations than between religions is in line with the results from studies by Inglehart and Baker (2000) that stress the importance of cross-national differences in values. They mention as examples German and Dutch Catholics who were shaped by the dominant Protestant institutions in the respective countries. An interesting finding of the present study with respect to that conclusion is that Dutch Muslims resemble Protestants more than they resemble Dutch Catholics in their importance ratings of vir-

tues. Most Muslims live in areas in The Netherlands that have been exposed more to Protestant than to Catholic influences. There seems to be a larger gap in the perceived moral beliefs than in the actual beliefs of Muslims and non-Muslims in The Netherlands. The findings do not support Samuel Huntington's theory (1996) about the "clash of civilizations," in which he postulates a fundamental gap between the Western and the Islamic culture.

The relative lack of importance of the influence of religion compared to that of national cultures on the importance of virtues has implications for immigration countries. Particularly in the case of immigrants from the Middle East, it is too often assumed that they are all Muslims, and that their religion is one of their most important characteristics.

One should realize that immigrants bring many different elements of their national culture into their host society, encompassing more aspects than religion and moral values. They bring, among other things, a different language, usually lower socioeconomic status and educational levels, frequently a more rural background, deviant legal norms, discrepant opinions on gender roles, larger families and more traditional values, as well as an experience of religion as a way of living that is more strongly interwoven with the institutions of the state. All these factors may have a stronger impact than their religion on their concept of virtues or even on their general adjustment to the new society.

We focused only on virtues and the extent to which our results would generalize to other moral ideas is unclear. The data suggest that it is not so much the content of moral values, but rather the intensity of the religion, as reflected in the high score on faith, which distinguishes Muslims from other religious or nonreligious groups. The results support the conclusions drawn on the basis of Hofstede's (1991) classification of national cultures. First, The Netherlands and Germany are almost each other's opposite on the masculinity-femininity dimension. The largest mean difference between the Dutch and German samples concerns mercy, which is seen as the least important virtue by the Germans. A similar difference in mercy was found between Spain and Germany, which also has a less masculine culture than Germany. Next, according to Hofstede, Germany and The Netherlands are individualistic countries, whereas Spain is more collectivistic. One of the differences between individualism and collectivism is a more explicit communication. This difference forms an essential part of Edward Hall's (1959) distinction between high- and low-context cultures. In high-context cultures, there are many contextual elements that help people understand the rules. As a result, much is taken for granted. By contrast, in low-context cultures, very little is taken for granted. Not surprisingly, compared to the Spaniards, the Germans and the Dutch attribute a much higher importance to the virtues of openness and reliability because they stress clarity and explicitness. It is interesting to note that Dutch Muslims attach roughly the same importance to reliability and openness as non-Muslim Dutch.

Reliability, openness, and mercy seem to be culture-dependent virtues. In contrast, the cardinal virtues of wisdom and justice, and the theological virtue of love, which are perceived as important in all three nations, seem to be more universal virtues. The same applies to the more contemporary virtues of respect and joy. It would be important and interesting to test these speculations in a larger sample of nations.

To conclude, national cultures appear to have a more important impact on moral values than do religions. Laymen and researchers alike may have overemphasized the influence of religion and underestimated the impact of other characteristics of immigrants. One of the implications of this study is that national culture is a valuable concept for explaining the differences in virtues between nations. Apparently, as Inglehart and Baker (2000) suggested, national traditions, reinforced by national institutions, shape the values of a nation's members, regardless of diverging religious heritages and practices. For practitioners, it would be useful to determine the level at which the shaping of national virtues takes place. Our guess is that the classroom, the workplace, the neighborhood, the health center, and the local authorities are key places where teachers, leaders, neighbors, health employees, and police officers consciously or unconsciously reinforce the virtues that are helpful for smooth ways of living and working together.

Virtues, by definition, have a strongly evaluative character. Nevertheless, they seem to be relatively independent of groups within a society. Measuring the importance people attach to certain virtues may be a way of determining the level of integration or assimilation of individuals and of determining key virtues on which people from different backgrounds may agree and, consequently, on the basis of which they may make concrete rules for behavior.

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